

ALEXANDRA LYTTON REGALADO

MATRIA

POEMS



Black
Lawrence
Press

“Tengo Patria y Matria.”
—Claribel Alegría

“A woman writing thinks back through her mothers.”
—Virginia Woolf

For my mother, Violeta.

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EL CHANDELIER

—After Pepón Osorio

We're chained to *El*
chandelier
ella, aquella—

extra syllable, typical woman's overstuffed suitcase,
the rib pulled from *Él* and *Aquel*

hasta la coronilla de rubias
and the singular trigueña
birthing strings of pearls
from our splayed legs

teardrop crystals, baggies of water suspended
above roadside fruit to scare off flies—
no deterrent to bears, moose, and deer,
the woodland creatures of our new North

blue dominos give way
to the cement swans, protectors of our lawns,
the coterie of archangels, saints
and chingalavista demons of the second tier

la Carabela de Colon sails across the ceiling,
the chandelier's first lights, glinting
off Glocks the color of coqui
and quetzal, lapis lazuli

Even the neuter objects prefer the male "O":
esto, eso, aquello, ello—knotted brows, thrust
lips push the air out—not the "A" of *ella*
that pulls back, the first note of pain

piramide of moreno kewpies
y los hijos de Hernán—no denying
he was magnificent:
corn-silk hair, eyes of jade, his pale face—

mothers sway like palms
over their golden cradles, malinchistas,
 ¿mi bebe? mire pues, es lindo, blanquito,
 y parece que, en cierta luz,
 sus ojos se ven azules
their newborn greys
dreaming music box ballerinas

And regarding *el tema* on how *El* is to end in “O”,
La is to end in “A”
 there is this: *el dilema,*
el drama—some have broken the rules

el problema is that these crossed over—
 el día, el aroma, el agua, el poema, el idioma—
el chandelier’s edge of lake, mineral smell of still water,
 the poem, a pebble in the quiet reeds

halo of AstroTurf torches in fringed skirts
trailing the underworld
 of fat doves and soccer balls kicked
 into the neighbor’s yard

and because the “A” stood at the front
with a glint in her eye:
 el águila, el ala
 also sailed across the border—
 even *el alma*

half man, half horse
with sticks of lightning
he killed the deer, monkeys, birds
 our children stared with eyes
 round and dark as the eyes of deer

But, O, O, O, *la mano*
is a raised hand—
eagle-eyed, her words sweep
 like a wing across the white page:

when there is more than one

La

we reclaim

las aguas, las alas, las almas.

SALVADORAN ROAD BINGO

Bingo #1:

*a woman balancing a basket on her head;
pickup truck loaded with entire living room set,
an ox-drawn cart;
family of 3 or more on a motorcycle, extra points if anyone wears helmets or mom rides
sidesaddle;
maíz drying by the side of road;
an open manhole, bonus if there's a branch propped in front to serve as a warning.*

Our Lotería is not El Mariachi, La Chalupa, El Nopal, not the smoke-filled bingo lounge of the Miccosukee Reservation, inky fingers dead set on winning, though the American dollar is our currency, ours is not El Apache, La Pera, El Catrín. For Salvadorans, all days are a Lotería. When we drive past someone laid out on the grass of the median we think 1) is he napping midday? 2) passed out drunk? 3) dead? And all three possibilities are highly likely.

Bingo #2:

*a boy on bike shepherding sad-eyed cows;
a Sunday borracho, extra point for an unsheathed machete;
cement eagles or lions on entryway columns;
road kill, bonus if it's a horse and it's being picked at by buzzards;
"Pinchazo" sign painted on a giant truck tire;
muddy trickle of a river, bonus if kids are swimming or women are washing clothes.*

At the stoplight will there be fire-eaters or clowns juggling machetes, will the man on the bus look leery or guilty as he slips his hand up the woman's skirt, is that asphalt smear the body of a stray dog or an old carpet, the boys tapping on the glass huffing paint with strange gold auras around their mouths: window-washers or phone thieves? We know to tuck our real purse under the passenger seat, have the fake one ready to hand over without a whimper. Our faces like the facades of our houses: bars on windows, broken glass embedded into the walls, electrified wires, coils of razor.

Bingo #3:

*a shirtless man, bonus if he's rubbing his belly;
a centennial ceiba, extra if its pillowy cotton seeds drift like snow;
landslide, boulders still on road;*

*one car towing another car with nothing more than a simple rope;
game of fútbol, extra points if they've got jerseys;
a roadside grave, bonus for paper flowers.*

On the roundabouts plants balance on spindly trunks, the leaves filmed with dust, and placed in a way that implies beauty is something that can only be dispensed in fistfuls, here a little dash of red croton, here some broken-belled hibiscus, there a spotty ixora. The unruly ficus trimmed to submissiveness, bowl-cut hairdos, white-painted trunks like bandaged, broken ankles. All day long cars mill around the flag, blasting storm clouds of exhaust, honking and jockeying to be first, the volcano's imperious eye watches the cars circle the carousel, around and around, as they splinter off, dodging potholes and gasoline rainbows.

Bingo #4:

*a hen followed by her pollitos, extra point if the gallo is around;
man pissing on the roadside;
laundry drying on a chain link fence;
bread-boy delivering his goods on bike, extra points if he toots his horn;
pupusería, bonus if it's called Yancy, Yessenia or another woman's name not Margoth.*

Every car is a *carreta bruja* on this highway, we've gone Red and bathed in red, oh deep colors bleed, a poem I found on the wash tag of a bath towel when I was twelve. Ours is the luck of my great grandfather who, one night, like any typical night, in a game of cards, lost a velvet sachet filled with his wife's diamonds, and the title of their house. The cantor calls out the Lotería in a riddle: El Salvador whom is going to save us, whom are we to save? Day after day, our fingers in the wounds—here it is, touch it, there is the proof—surviving is what we do best.

Bingo #5:

*restaurant and clothing store ads in full English;
three car washes or three auto-hotels in a row;
shacks bannered with Coca-Cola or Diana signs;
camión loaded with sugarcane, bonus if workers ride on top;
graffiti, only if it's not related to gangs or political parties;
volcano, extra points if it's smoking.*

We answer these riddles every day: El Hambre, La Navaja, El Machete, La Tortilla. A tablero of 9 chances to fill your board, because when there's an accident, though a clown in a Cipitio hat was directing traffic, and a car hits a tree—you can be

certain Salvadorans will quickly make the most out of that bad turn. For us, luck depends not on guessing, but betting on what we know to be true. Out of nowhere people will come with machetes and dismember the branches, load them in wheelbarrows and cart them off for firewood, a woman will stand by the side of the road, next to the smashed car, pressing her hand to her bright red cheekbone, and seeping through her fingers, the day's first ¡Lotería!: La Rosa in full bloom.

LOTERÍA I

she raises her wand & they march in her wake:

LA CACHIPORRISTA

Because I can't take a photo through the bulletproof glass
as our car eases to the corner that merges with the highway,
where a chop shop displays its wares of cars quartered
to fenders, grilles, rims, spoilers—I will have to remember
the man's hooded eyes, as he watches from behind the wire
diamonds of chain-link, the whirling wrists of a teenage girl
in a majorette skirt fashioned out of half-inch-thick strips
of cut newsprint, the fringe swaying with her hips
as she twirls a baton of broken broomstick
in circles, wrist over wrist, and tosses it high as she
turns to catch it fanning behind her back; and the sun's light
pressing on the square patch of a roadside garden
of black-eyed Susans, zinnias, and dahlias in plastic
gallon jugs and rusted tins, the halved car tire that serves
as a trench to keep out the leaf-cutter ants that could easily
strip the lime sapling bare in the course of one summer night.

the pavement breaks into diamonds:

LA LLUVIA

Our love

the sound of water rushing
into water
the rain-slick leaves reddened bricks

hands circle

my waist round
my hips
the potted geranium pulses

in sheets of water the lacquered plants
nod yes yes and
yes in currents, veils

everything slides

a river shrugs the carpet
of earth
crops smother roads split and sink

how it sweeps

us away the slate rain,
its obsidian blades
a rough beard
against
a lover's skin walls collapse

families abandon their homes
to cross
the swollen river with nothing
but a rope
tied around their waists.

she holds out a steady hand:

LA ENFERMERA

Resplendent in her whites against a backdrop of green
the nurse pauses on the sidewalk and I watch her talk to the air,
shake her head, and smile; she makes mouth motions
I recognize as coos, and then kisses. I look closer
and see that she's stopped beneath the shade of the avocado tree
to admire a swaddled infant, two weeks at most, sleeping
in the grass. The roots of the tree form a kind of cradle padded
with a muslin coffee sack and the nurse bends to pluck
off fallen leaves, brush off an insect, and smooth
the blanket across the baby's chest. On the other side
of the tree's thick trunk a teenage girl sits on the curb
selling peeled green mangos. I keep vigil;
cars whisk by lifting the ruffles of her pink apron.
The girl props her drowsing head, leans over the bulge
of her emptied womb, extending the bag of fruit,
eyes closed, willing anyone: take it. Take it all.

don't touch the dust on its wings:

LA PAPALOTA

I.

Suppose you whisper *death* as you step
naked from the shower and spy high on the tiled wall—
it must've come in during the night's rainstorm—

a mottled brown moth the size of your open palms,
slanted cat eyes on its forewings. Mamá says the bat-moth
dusts the four corners of the house with sorrow.

2.

The night before the crossing you dreamed of cutting
your hair in hunks, with the sincere intention
of making an even, straight-edged cut.

Mama's cinnamon-scented fingers
made the sign of the cross on your forehead,
Dios te bendiga, hija, and you pressed your ear

to her heart's battering, your footsteps
swept into the desert's pools of glass.

3.

Suppose the red blot in the sky is the telltale birthmark
on your son's newborn skin, the glowing sun on his temple
that you circled with your fingertip.

Then you might see how that orb is also the gasp
from Mama's mouth as she witnessed the full moon
shining on your pregnant belly.

4.

How the bat-moth batters itself on the windowpane
as your son sleeps in the dim bedroom; it circles and claps—
that something so delicate could make such a noise.

Its plain stupidity is what moved you. Insisting
and insisting on the closed jalousie;
the broken pane, just centimeters away.

5.

Suppose you take a white envelope and nudge the moth out.
And the bat-moth tumbles back.

the fifteen candles of her life:

LA QUINCEAÑERA

We are here to talk, the Salvatruchas tell her.

Let's go down to the dock and have a swim.

Sara's eyes swing toward her mother's

who motions with her lips to take her younger sister along,

and so they walk in the slanting sunlight to the lakeside, splash
on the first two steps that descend into shadow.

A lone cloud hovers mid-lake. *Chepe is upset*

you don't want to be his girl anymore, one of the mareras says.

Underwater, her sister sweeps a bare foot across Sara's calf.

Yes, Sara replies, *that's why you're here.* The other marera claps

a hand on the little sister's shoulder, MS-13 etched blue

across her knuckles, drops some bills into the sister's palm

and sends her to the corner store for Cokes.

Heads down, shoulder to shoulder, a ring of mountains
around the slate waters of lake Coatepeque. Towers of cloud
stuff the mouth of sky.

When she stops thrashing
they wade out and walk up the dirt hill to the roadside
and make their way back. The sister returns to the rippled edge

and finds no one; their mother paces the shore past midnight,
flashlight in hand, finds her daughter's rubber sandal
in the sandy loam that is only the tiny bodies of whorled snails.

At the day's light, a spear fisher dives beneath the dock
and finds Sara's body tangled among the reeds. Before this,
fifteen days of rain, like the years of her life, swallowed
docks, swelled mountainsides, unearthed boulders, felled
two hundred year old conacastes. At the hilltop restaurants

where the panorama of lake splays out, people gather
on a Sunday night to wail Karaoke over soccer matches, or lean
into their lovers, while children fling their spinning toy tops
into a plastic tub, reds and blues dinging the sides, white streaks
whirling, warring to be the last one standing.